



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Modern Philology

VOLUME XIV

October 1916

NUMBER 6

HEINRICH VON KLEIST

Heinrich von Kleist is hardly a familiar name to English readers, though he is the subject of a book in English¹ as early as 1875, which contains an excellent blank verse rendering of his greatest play, *Der Prinz von Homburg*, and an entirely satisfactory translation of his most powerful narrative, *Michael Kohlhaas*. In Germany his reputation is fully established. The critic, the historian, the *régisseur*, the poet, the painter, have done him homage. Tieck rescued him—almost literally—in 1821; in the fifties Treitschke read that inner spirit of his work which Brahm, Eloesser, and others have since so admirably interpreted; Adolf von Menzel in the seventies captured the vividness of particular creations in spirited black-and-white; Wilhelm von Polenz found in Kleist's biography the material for a tragedy in 1891; finally the craftsmanship of Erich Schmidt and his henchmen has in recent years inclosed his works in a compact five-volume edition which meets all needs.

This paper endeavors to trace the inner consistency of Kleist's temperament and to relate it to the peculiar spirit that pervades his plays. It is true that few writers defy orderly analysis so stubbornly, and that which is offered here cannot pretend to explain him completely. But it is hoped that it may be found suggestive as an attempted reading of an evasive personality and a unique sequence of plays.

¹ Lloyd and Newton, *Prussia's Representative Man*. London: Teubner, 1875.

The personality is discovered, if anywhere, in the few years immediately following Kleist's retirement from the army in the spring of 1799. He had entered it, it will be remembered, in June, 1792, before he had completed his fifteenth year. After going through the siege of Mainz and rising to a lieutenancy, he turned civilian to study mathematics, philosophy, and Latin, realizing that "was der Reiseplan dem Reisenden ist, das ist der Lebensplan dem Menschen,"¹ and for the benefit of a fellow-soldier he wrote, Baedeker-fashion, a lengthy *Aufsatz, den sichern Weg des Glücks zu finden, und ungestört, auch unter den grössten Drangsalen des Lebens, ihn zu geniessen*. He is loath to lose a day without drawing "moralische Revenüen,"² and when he turns eighteenth-century schoolmaster and induces his betrothed to write essays in his absence, her progress means more than her love: "Ich freue mich darauf, dass ich Dich nicht wieder-kennen werde, wenn ich Dich wiedersehe."³ Kleist affords at this stage in his life an astonishing instance of the premature personal composure to which certain types of training can lead. Steady military discipline has doubtless straitlaced countless natures into the acceptance for life of an activity, an outlook, and a self-criticism, which do not exceed a definition in simple terms. Even Kleist, whose enigmatic complexity defies the biographer a century after his death, waited two years, till the spring of 1801, for his real personality to break the iron shell which a long boyhood apprenticeship in the army and a rigid family tradition had forged around it. Meanwhile, in complete ignorance of the hidden processes of his nature, he constructed and advertised to his friends his clear outlook and his trite morality.

His early letters, in which a precocious intellect urbanely solves the riddle of the stars, hold their own for blandness with any eighteenth-century moralizing. Indeed, the nineteenth century is nowhere in evidence, unless it be in the alarming intensity with which he embraces the standpoint and the purpose of the moment. He writes in February, 1801, immediately before his intellectual capitulation: "Ich beschloss, nicht aus dem Zimmer zu gehen, bis ich über

¹ *Briefe (Werke, ed. E. Schmidt, V)*, p. 43.

² *Ibid.*, p. 162.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

einen Lebensplan entschieden wäre; aber 8 Tage vergingen, und ich musste doch am Ende das Zimmer unentschlossen wieder verlassen."¹ An analysis of his mind at this time yields a list of purely eighteenth-century qualities, but the vigor, the ferocity almost, with which they are announced is foreign to the essential spirit of that age. And though something of the logic which Kleist here parades stays with him through life and peeps with impish coolness through the lurid curtains of his imagination, yet it is the intensity alone that is truly characteristic of him. It is reflected again and again in his dramatic creations. The blind and exhaustive acceptance of a point of view, a purpose, a virtue, is fundamental in some of his strongest figures. Hardly anywhere is it absent. Its most energetic expression is in Penthesilea and in Hermann, but it is also most intimately conveyed in Käthchen, and disconcertingly in Sylvester Schroffenstein. Perhaps Sylvester, blindly aggravating the fatal mischief with the excess of a simple Christian virtue, best illustrates this anomalous period of Kleist's life, when tragedy and poetry were outwardly so very remote.

To return to the biography. The much-discussed Würzburg journey, falling in the middle of Kleist's two years of suspension, must surely have had a practical, not a spiritual, purpose. It probably did much to prepare the way for the mental crisis of 1801, but it did not reveal him fully to himself. It undoubtedly awoke in him a new sensitiveness to natural beauty and a vague presentiment of poetic ability. The two descriptions of Würzburg are the clearest indication of this:

Den Lauf der Strassen hat der regelloseste Zufall gebildet. In dieser Hinsicht unterscheidet sich Würzburg durch nichts, von der Anlage des gemeinsten Dorfes. Da hat sich Jeder angebaut, wo es ihm grade gefiel, ohne eben auf den Nachbar viele Rücksicht zu nehmen. Daher findet man nichts als eine Zuzammenstellung vieler einzelnen Häuser, und vermisst die Idee eines Ganzen, die Existenz eines allgemeinen Interesses. Oft ehe man es sich versieht ist man in ein Labyrinth von Gebäuden gerathen, wo man sich den Faden der Ariadne wünschen muss, um sich heraus zu finden. Das Alles könnte man der grauen Vorzeit noch verzeihen; aber wenn heut zu Tage ganz an der Stelle der alten Häuser neue gebaut werden, so dass also auch die Idee, die Stadt zu ordnen, nicht vorhanden ist, so heisst das ein Versehen verewigen.²

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 195.

² *Ibid.*, p. 114.

This was on his arrival in September, 1800. In October he writes: "Ich finde jetzt die Gegend um diese Stadt weit angenehmer, als ich sie bei meinem Einzuge fand; ja ich möchte fast sagen, dass ich sie jetzt schön finde—und ich weiss nicht, ob sich die Gegend verändert hat, oder das Herz, das ihren Eindruck empfiegt,"¹ and is loud in praise of hills and water. But the book of maxims is still cherished and Kleist remains almost as unconscious of his inner nature as when a year earlier he overruled his family and doffed his uniform.

The final tapping of the shell was, curiously enough, due to the reading of Kant's philosophy. It is hard today to realize the intense personal importance to the reader that the "reine Vernunft" had in its own age. "Es scheint, als ob ich eines von den Opfern der Thorheit werden würde, deren die kantische Philosophie so viele auf das Gewissen hat."² *Bildung* and *Wahrheit*, the two main props of Kleist's jerry-built castle, were knocked from under at a touch of this hammer of the intellect. Thus the intellectual dogmatism which insulated his inmost self could only be counteracted—so thoroughgoing was his acceptance of it—by intellectual means. With almost childlike pathos he cries:

Wir können nicht entscheiden ob das, was wir Wahrheit nennen, wahrhaft Wahrheit ist, oder ob es uns nur so scheint. Ist das letzte, so ist die Wahrheit, die wir hier sammeln, nach dem Tode nicht mehr—und alles Bestreben, ein Eigenthum sich zu erwerben, das uns auch in das Grab folgt, ist vergeblich. . . . Seit diese Ueberzeugung, nämlich, dass hienieden keine Wahrheit zu finden ist, vor meine Seele trat, habe ich nicht wieder ein Buch angerührt. Ich bin unthätig in meinem Zimmer umhergegangen, ich habe mich an das offene Fenster gesetzt, ich bin hinausgelaufen ins Freie, eine innerliche Unruhe trieb mich zuletzt in Tabagien und Caffeehäuser, ich habe Schauspiele und Concerte besucht, um mich zu zerstreuen, ich habe sogar, um mich zu betäuben, eine Thorheit begangen, die Dir Carl lieber erzählen mag, als ich; und dennoch war der einzige Gedanke, den meine Seele in diesem äusseren Tumulte mit glühender Angst bearbeitete immer nur dieser: dein *einziges*, dein *höchstes* Ziel ist gesunken.³

From then on till the autumn of 1811, when Kleist and a married lady of his acquaintance committed a dual suicide at the Wannsee, an astonishing succession of changing prospects might be recounted

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 144.

² *Ibid.*, p. 207.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

from his life, and in that short space were generated the whole of his writings of any importance—a masterpiece of comedy, a masterpiece of serious drama, four or five other plays of astonishing vigor, a handful of brilliant short stories, and a few odd lyrics and snatches of prose. Stranger still, he appears to have remained, up to the beginning of this period, quite unconscious of the powers within him, or at any rate unconscious of their nature—a thing in itself phenomenal, though not necessarily, as one biographer says, unique in the lives of poets.¹

What of his spiritual life in these ten years? During the months which immediately followed the loss of his youthful outlook, there is in his letters much talk of fate—more, at least, than at any other period of his life. With his flimsy vessel sunk, the young swimmer is at first aghast at the welter of blind forces over which he has been blissfully cruising. He exaggerates the significance of the mere accidents of life, or, rather, he sees the full significance where habit dulls an average mind. In July, 1801, the bray of a donkey frightens the horses behind which he and his sister are driving; the carriage upsets without harm to either—"Und an einem Eselsgeschrei hieng ein Menschenleben? Und wenn es nun in dieser Minute geschlossen gewesen wäre, *darum* also hätte ich gelebt? Darum? *Das* hätte der Himmel mit diesem dunkeln, räthselhaften, irrdischen Leben gewollt, und weiter nichts—? Doch für diesmal war es noch nicht geschlossen,—*wofür* er uns das Leben gefristet hat, wer kann es wissen?"² Kleist is all confusion for a while, "wie die Werchfasern im Spinnrocken,"³ and he strives in vain "mit der Hand des Verstandes den Faden der Wahrheit, den das Rad der Erfahrung hinaus ziehen soll, um die Spule des Gedächtnisses zu ordnen."³ And, in the long run, the personal confusion, far more than the impersonal caprice, holds his curiosity. The references to fate become fewer and less striking in their utterance. A sentence on the "ego," meanwhile, blazes hot even amid the smolder of his letters: "Dieses räthselhafte Ding, das wir besitzen, wir wissen nicht von wem, das uns fortführt, wir wissen nicht wohin, das unser Eigenthum ist, wir wissen nicht, ob wir darüber schalten dürfen, eine Habe, die nichts

¹ F. Servaes, *Heinrich von Kleist*, 1912.

² *Briefe*, p. 240.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

werth ist, wenn sie uns etwas werth ist, ein Ding, wie ein Widerspruch, flach und tief, öde und reich, würdig und verächtlich, vieldeutig und unergründlich, ein Ding, das jeder wegwerfen möchte, wie ein unverständliches Buch."¹ The words burst out from the context with cumulative force, as if they had lain and gathered power in the inner chambers of his mind. And the very fact of their energy is peculiar when their content is considered. The riddle of personality has often found expression, but where does it receive so sweeping, so fateful, a voice? Character is Fate—the saying is trite and a commonplace, but the mind which such a reflection dominates is apt to be quizzical, reflective, analytic, and its creations will be of like nature. Kleist, strangely enough, gives these unforgettable words a driving power and a momentum which add a vast impersonal quality to the thing he characterizes. His feeling for personality is energetic in a manner foreign to all that is personal. It is dangerous, dynamic, destructive.

Kleist's letters, from about this time on, assume a more and more practical character, and it is in his plays that the real essence of his spirit must now be sought. It is not that reticence conceals the working of his mind. His frankness remains as pronounced as ever and becomes phenomenal in his latest letters. The collapse of his first intellectual edifice was followed by no attempt at a second. He disparages knowledge and the intellect, and relinquishes any endeavor to organize further the vast material of experience. "Die Wissenschaften habe ich ganz aufgegeben."² And some six years later (June, 1807) in a mood of despair, which, if passing, brings out, at least, a conviction that was too profound to leave him: "Ach, es ist ein ermüdender Zustand, dieses Leben, recht, wie Sie sagten, eine Fatigue. Erfahrungen rings, dass man eine Ewigkeit brauchte, um sie zu würdigen, und, kaum wahrgenommen, schon wieder von andern verdrängt, die eben so unbegriffen verschwinden."³ He sees in the intellect no power whatsoever to order life, and beholds in the only experience which persists—the human consciousness—a complete riddle. His essay *Ueber die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden* is thoroughly characteristic of him. Here he builds up an arresting paradox on the theme: "l'idée vient en parlant." Sig-

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 244.² *Ibid.*, p. 260.³ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

nificant, too, is the fact that he retains an interest in mathematics, where his craving for absolute values perhaps found a last refuge, unassailed by experience. "Ich kann ein Differentiale finden, und einen Vers machen; sind das nicht die beiden Enden der menschlichen Fähigkeit?"¹ When he seeks a constant in art, he turns in like spirit to musical counterpoint. Three months before his death he writes: "Ich glaube, dass im Generalbass die wichtigsten Aufschlüsse über die Dichtkunst enthalten sind."² But he makes henceforth no attempt to sort the changing phenomena of life, and only in his last play is there embodied any real sense of order—order, too, of a purely practical nature. Nowhere does Kleist appear to reason a single step beyond this. His sole anchorage is personality with its unsounded depths and incalculable storms.

This unusual outlook upon life—unusual at least for so intense a mind as Kleist's—has left its mark on the body of his plays.³ In fact, it accounts for the peculiar light that is on them. Kleist's vision, be it repeated, is anomalous in that the sole conclusion he cherishes about life, the unfathomableness of personality, gathers in his mind a vigor, an all-controlling importance, which was rarely, if ever, consistently associated with it by an imaginative writer. Something akin to it lurks, no doubt, in the early work of many exuberant poets; it imparts luridness, perhaps, to some Stürmer and Dränger, and to certain Elizabethans. But it was never steadily maintained through any series of plays the merits of which are comparable with Kleist's. Plays like *Penthesilea* and the *Hermannsschlacht* draw their life, to an almost unparalleled degree, from a single personal source—so much so, that they raise questions of dramatic theory which might have lain unexamined.

It is peculiar to drama, as opposed to other creative forms of literature, that the whole of its action must pass through the medium of personality. Personality must either furnish the action, or at least reflect it. More than that, there is a quantitative limit set to this medium; the number of characters in any play is infinitely small

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 316.

² *Ibid.*, p. 429.

³ The personal element in the *Novellen* is very elusive. It seemed convenient to omit them here.

in relation to the population of a nation or of the world, and of these, even, only a handful can be given prominence. But since the outer world and, particularly, outer humanity must necessarily be related to the immediate action, the task of the dramatist is thereby complicated. He must present, through the mouths of a small group of individuals, a piece of life in which they not only reveal themselves, but also reflect a twofold association: first, with the more numerous life of mankind wherein their lives are imbedded; secondly, with the all-inclosing world of matter and accident. Thus the personal utterance of the play must be ballasted, as it were, with elements relatively impersonal, and others which are entirely impersonal. Or, if convenience may select the terms, the individual must control three registers: the "individual" itself, the "collective" of humanity, and the "impersonal" of natural forces. The harmonics of drama demands this complexity.

It is true that scenery itself, by merely providing a material setting, contributes to the impersonal. The simple enactment before a curtain of the simplest dialogue adds impersonal elements which the literature of the conversation might utterly lack. But the greater dramatists have always shrunk from the dissociating of stage-effect and book-effect and have conscientiously furnished a literary counterpart for all that is essential in the stage-impression. The very continuance of drama lies here in this parallelism, and a swerving in either direction means a definite weakening of vitality. The critic is thus entitled to search for the presence of these three elements—the individual, the collective, the impersonal—in the substance of a play, and to observe, further, how far the dramatic energy is distributed among them. An accurate division could nowhere be made of so subtly blended a compound as human life, but the presence of these elements in a plausible analysis is immediately perceptible and it is not difficult to examine the manner in which dramatists introduce them. Thus, it is at once evident that the Greek chorus makes ample provision of the vaster inclosing human substance, the collective, and, by definitely appropriating thus much of the vigor, gives the dramatist freer play in the stressing of his principal characters, without risk of disturbing the desirable balance of energies. Similarly, the common life of Shakspeare's relief scenes, all, in fact, that

we call choric, is neither more nor less than a provision of this middle element. Much of it can, of course, be supplied without the actual presence of subordinate groups and masses of humanity. Any reference to distinct past or distinct future, any looking outside of himself on the part of a character, contributes to it. And even without this, any generalizations, any philosophic reflection, any insistence on universals in human experience, will do as much. The third element, the impersonal, expressing itself through all reference to the non-human, through all accident and circumstance and material accessories, looks after itself, no doubt, better than the second. But it is interesting to observe how scrupulous Shakspeare is to embody his nature settings in the letter of his scenes, and with what cunning he mingles the sway of personal impulse with the coercion of circumstance. Nor must the impersonal potentialities of mere speech be overlooked. Steadiness of rhythm and pitch are parts of a universal continuity and themselves contribute impersonal energy. Perhaps the following passage from a modern novel is not without relevancy: "‘The tears fell from her eyes—and then she died,’ concluded the girl in an imperturbable monotone, which more than anything else, more than the white statuesque immobility of her person, more than mere words could do, troubled my mind profoundly with the passive, irremediable horror of the scene.’"¹ For such reasons as this, greater license is tolerated in dramatic characterization, where the whole play is set in verse; the prose play, lacking this particular element of impersonal control, must treat its personalities more cautiously.

The reasonableness of the greatest dramas is impossible without a just distribution of these elements. True, it is a distribution for genius to effect, and neither mathematics nor political economy can calculate or deduce the percentages of it. It is a balance of dramatic energies, capable of endless variety, but hedged by limits which the intuitive wisdom of larger poetic minds has never failed to discern. It is to the credit, however, of some lesser writers that their very deviation from this unwritten standard, their special endeavors, their experiments, and their errors direct the thoughtful mind to issues which greater poets conceal, and, by pointing to the problem, at least serve to illuminate the glory of major imaginations. The various

¹ Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*.

attempts in modern drama to stage a composite hero, to compose an action dominated by the mass, are a complete example of this technical suggestiveness. Schiller's *Tell* and other plays only partially subordinate the individual. Not until Hauptmann's *Weber* does plural humanity hold the stage throughout. By avoiding the stressing of individuals and making the aggregate completely dominant, Hauptmann has furnished dramatic criticism with an intensely interesting example of maximum insistence on one element. The result is a play of novel quality and impression. The sharp, soaring moments of more normally organized drama are impossible here, where the gathering mutter of indeterminate masses muffles the single voice. The scenes shade off imperceptibly into the recesses of perspective, while a brooding, pervasive tone gives an abiding suggestion of unopened magazines of strength. Some such effect goes inevitably with the stressing of this middle element.

Hauptmann's *Weber* was a conscious attempt at the solution of a technical problem. Kleist's plays—generally speaking—form a striking counterpart at the other end of the century, for, quite unconsciously, with no theories at his back, he carries the first element to the point of extremest emphasis. Scherer was aware, as indeed all readers must be, of a peculiar and completely novel intensity in Kleist's characteristic work. He felt at once that it was excessive in its kind, some dramatic maximum in a particular direction. He says of Kleist: "Er treibt die Objectivität und den Realismus so weit, dass er sich im Drama ganz auf die Darstellung des Gegenwärtigen concentrirt und uns in den engen Gesichtskreis handelnder und empfindender Menschen mehr, als irgend ein Dramatiker vor ihm, gebannt hält."¹ The terms "objectivity" and "realism" in this context are not beyond criticism, but the body of the statement is lucid enough—Kleist devotes himself to the "presentation of the immediate"; he rivets his whole attention on the rendering of a definite piece of life, rapid in its enactment and limited in its personnel. One is tempted to go beyond Scherer. So intensely does Kleist concentrate his vision that the foreground of his spectacle of energies becomes dominant; the individual blocks the prospect, obscuring the middle distance with its collective human chorus, and almost crowding out the background

¹ *Geschichte der deutsche Literatur.*

of the material world. He violently deranges the balance in favor of the immediate and personal; it is almost entirely from the actual characters—often from a single character—that the vigor derives. He is careless of the larger canvas; he is at no pains to weave the special action into union with the vaster life without; humanity at large is a neglected force. In his hands the material world is mainly visual, rarely dynamic, rarely emerging into the interference of circumstance; it is a mere playground, with no power of stealthy influence or prerogative of intervention. Kleist's *Penthesilea* in the first decade of the nineteenth century is a critical *Gegenstück* to Hauptmann's *Weber* in the last. Both constitute a *ne plus ultra* in dramatic stresses.

Penthesilea is the most complete title in all drama, since nowhere else does the title-rôle so tyrannize the play. It is only after an immersion in the play's atmosphere that what is here said of it can be tested. And clearly any measure of dramatic excess is relative; elements essential in all life can be minimized, never eliminated. The propelling forces can never be wholly gathered from one element alone; an external analysis will always point to a mixed origin. Thus it is from her dead mother that the initial fillip is given to Penthesilea's conduct, and the changing fortune of war is essential in the development of the crisis. But in the real world of the play the personal energy of Penthesilea alone is felt. From the opening picture of paralytic amazement on the part of Achilles' companions, who relate and behold the feverish pursuit of the Amazon queen, "die Hyäne, die blind-wütende," down to the last scene of her astonishing volitional suicide, an extreme manifestation of pure will which the daring of playwrights has surely never outdone—

Denn jetzt steig' ich in meinen Busen nieder,
Gleich einem Schacht, und grabe, kalt wie Erz,
Mir ein vernichtendes Gefühl hervor.
Dies Erz, dies läutr' ich in der Glut des Jammers
Hart mir zu Stahl; tränk' es mit Gift sodann,
Heissätzendem, der Reue, durch und durch;
Trag' es der Hoffnung ew'gem Amboss zu,
Und schärf' und spitz' es mir zu einem Dolch;
Und diesem Dolch jetzt reich' ich meine Brust:
So! So! So! So! Und wieder!—Nun ist's gut [ll. 3025–34]—

there is in the course of some three thousand lines hardly a pause in the furious exhibition of Penthesilea's blazing personality. The play is, indeed, less a dramatic action than a dramatic conflagration, the mere spectacle of which possesses the perceptions of the beholder as if it were the sum of all forces and the world about it inert matter for it to vitalize or consume. So intense is this tragic heroine that, for the time being, the universe seems bounded spatially by her energies, and all that she does not immediately touch into warmth—the rose festival, Troy, and Agamemnon—seems unreal as shadows.

It is interesting to observe some of the characteristics of this amazing play and to consider how far they contribute to the peculiar dominant effect. It will at once be noticed that the sententious is almost entirely lacking. Reflection is as remote from Penthesilea, her friends, and her opponents, as if the lives of them all had begun with the play's opening and the very basis of reflection were absent. The earlier history of the Amazons and their leader—Achilles and the Greeks have as good as none!—is narrated as far as is necessary to make the weird plot plausible for the moment, but there is a vast gulf between it and the immediate business. The events lie in a remote past, a different world almost. Their life is not the life of the play. They seem to belong to a different complex of energies, a detached system of forces. It is as if the eyes had followed the line of a searchlight and become absorbed in its circle of illumination and had then cast their gaze suddenly back on some distant light to the rear. The bond with outer humanity is not felt throughout the play. All that is not seen is too remote to appear continuous with the actual and visible, and the created life of the poet's brain seems a thing isolated, its own universe, its own first cause. So much for the collective. Turning to the impersonal, we find that the material setting of the play is by no means ignored. On the contrary, it is beheld with an extraordinary sharpness; it is vivid to an unparalleled degree. The return of Achilles, seen off-stage from a hillock, is scientifically recorded with a catalogue of the parts of himself and his chariot horses as they appear in turn over the hill-crest:

Seht! Steigt dort, über jenes Berges Rücken,
Ein Haupt nicht, ein bewaffnetes, empor?
Ein Helm, von Federbüschen überschattet?

Der Nacken schon, der mächt'ge, der es trägt?
 Die Schultern auch, die Arme, stahlumglänzt?
 Das ganze Brustgebild, o seht doch, Freunde,
 Bis wo den Leib der goldne Gurt umschliesst?

Die Häupter sieht man schon, geschmückt mit Blossen,
 Des Rossgespanns! Nur noch die Schenkel sind,
 Die Hufe, von der Höhe Rand bedeckt!
 Jetzt, auf dem Horizonte, steht das ganze
 Kriegsfahrzeug da! [ll. 356-62, 364-68.]

Still more breath-taking is the observation of the chariot-wheels, whirled in flight to an opaque disc:

Der Blick dringt unzerknicht sich durch die Räder
 Zur Scheibe fliegend eingedreht, nicht hin [ll. 385-86].

Penthesilea even sees her own reflection in the shining breastplate of Achilles when they approach one another (ll. 642-45). There is a lurid clarity about the whole picture. The landscape is illuminated by the blaze of Penthesilea's self. She is its sun. Of itself it is, in a phrase of Kleist's,

Nichts als ein dunkler Grund nur, eine Folie,
 Die Funkelpracht des Einzigen zu heben [*Penth.*, ll. 1042-43].

It is a thing visualized with no energy of its own. It is usually in the half-lights that nature seems alert, an incalculable store of hidden forces. "When other things sank brooding to sleep the heath appeared slowly to awake and listen," says Thomas Hardy. Macbeth's witches fade in the sunlight, and it is in the obscurity of rain and thunder that the frail body of a Lear is buffeted. In *Penthesilea* the very clearness of the pictorial vision robs the things seen of their true energy. Hebbel felt this to be spurious: "In Heinrich von Kleist's falscher Plastik wird gewissermassen der Lebensodem auch sichtbar gemacht."¹ There is no atmosphere in it, no impressionism, only color and outline and brightness. It has the flat, inert falseness of a color photograph. It astonishes the eye, but leaves the spirit hungry.

Other characteristics might be derived, but these are among the most obvious. Their contribution to the atmosphere of the play is

¹ *Tagebücher*, ed. Werner, IV, 5740.

a uniform one, and its effect is to identify Penthesilea with the vitality of the whole action. She storms comet-like through the breathless succession of twenty-four scenes that constitute the play,

Mit eines Waldstroms wütendem Erguss
Die einen, wie die andern, niederbrausend [ll. 120–21].

She rules imperiously the very forces of nature, when she in her furious onset

Hinweg die Luft trinkt lechzend, die sie hemmt [l. 398].

The play cannot command our affection; it must always evoke a large measure of disapproval; but the sheer energy of its central figure will remain a thing not easy to put aside, for it is a supreme instance, surpassing Marlowe, of that type of play which a single person dominates.

The same tendency influences every play of this disconcerting author. His earliest play, *Die Familie Schroffenstein*, is the only one with a deliberate attempt to employ the energy of blind forces in vitalizing the action, and this feature of the work seems, from an inspection of the variants, to have been an afterthought.¹ The play probably arose during the brief fatalistic mood of 1801 and was externally influenced by it. Certainly the coincidences in its plot are ludicrous in the extreme and only less foolish than the absurd little finger, cut from a dead child's hand, which contributes in some measure to the general misunderstanding and is grotesquely accentuated late in the play as a symbol of fateful malice. The variety of the characters, the strongly differentiated scenes—there is a witch's kitchen with cauldron and incantations as well as some woodland love-making—the presence of a fair amount of general reflection, all these do indeed create a feeling of balance, which makes the play, immature as it is, the most normal in general impression of all Kleist's dramas and gives promise of a development far more on traditional lines than proved to be the case. But even here the mood which makes puppets of mankind is felt to be on the wane and the unfathomable personality asserts itself. The character of Rupert—in lesser degree Sylvester—is a clear forerunner of the later unique studies. The opening scene—it must be one of Kleist's earliest—strikes a

¹ Cf. Kleist's MS note at the beginning of IV, iii, and again to l. 2223.

furious personal note. Mass has just been sung in the castle chapel at Rossitz; Rupert and his family approach the altar:

- Rupert:* Ich schwöre Rache! Rache! auf die Hostie,
Dem Haus' Sylvesters, Grafen Schroffenstein.
(*Er empfängt das Abendmahl.*)
Die Reihe ist an dir, mein Sohn.
- Ottokar:* Mein Herz
Trägt wie mit Schwingen deinen Fluch zu Gott.
Ich schwöre Rache, so wie du.
- Rup.:* Den Namen,
Mein Sohn, den Namen nenne!
- Ott.:* Rache schwör' ich
Sylvestern Schroffenstein!
- Rup.:* Nein, irre nicht!
Ein Fluch, wie unsrer, kömmt vor Gottes Ohr,
Und jedes Wort bewaffnet er mit Blitzen.
Drum wäge sie gewissenhaft.—Sprich nicht
"Sylvester," sprich "sein ganzes Haus," so hast
Du's sichrer.
- Ott.:* Rache schwör' ich, Rache!
Dem Mörderhaus' Sylvesters.
(*Er empfängt das Abendmahl.*)
- Rup.:* Eustache,
Die Reihe ist an dir.
- Eustache:* Verschone mich,
Ich bin ein Weib—
- Rup.:* Und Mutter auch des Toten.
- Eust.:* O Gott! Wie soll ein Weib sich rächen?
- Rup.:* In
Dedanken. Würge sie betend.
(*Sie empfängt das Abendmahl.*)

[ll. 23–39.]

Of this same father, Ottokar says:

Er trägt uns, wie die See das Schiff, wir müssen
Mit seiner Woge fort, sie ist nicht zu
Beschwören [ll. 1454–56].

The thesis can be applied instructively to the whole series of Kleist's plays, and, while none of them instances it so completely as *Penthesilea*, their most remarkable peculiarities tally closely with it and can, perhaps, be fully comprehended only from this point of view. Hermann is an amazing example of purely personal initiative bending

a disunited nation to a great issue and, elsewhere, Käthchen's apparent passivity is, at bottom, the controlling energy in the only parts of the play that truly live. In both these most unique works the severance from normal life is strongly pronounced. The *Hermannsschlacht* is anything but a typical national assertion; it is a penetrating study of an individual manifestation of patriotism, so unusual in nature as to be incomprehensible to Hermann's own fellows. Käthchen is an unforgettable study, one of the most intimate feminine studies in literature, but with the slightest possible measure of general validity. It is significant, too, that the nature-setting which Kleist deliberately associates with her:

—wo der Zeisig sich das Nest gebaut,
Der zwitschernde, in dem Hollunderstrauch [V, xii],¹

is as highly specialized among external phenomena as is Käthchen among women. The impersonal contribution, exquisite as a decorative setting, is in no way a *milieu* and stands for no force or influence. The mediaeval gear which bestrews the play like an untidy museum is equally devoid of inner significance. The bustle of it all is straightforwardly refreshing, but it is hardly in serious relation to the principal characters. Käthchen is ruthlessly withdrawn from the rich associations, so superbly conveyed in the opening scene, and the succeeding pictures, with the exception of III, i, have nothing of their breadth. Like the landscape of *Penthesilea*—though in lesser degree—they are seen without mood or atmosphere, stage-settings in flat surfaces for characters that move to and fro on an intervening plane. Further, Kleist's broken rhythms of speech, which diminish the impersonal in all his plays, are further accentuated here by the very capricious alternation of prose and verse.

The attitude that this paper takes is frankly remote from R. M. Meyer's generalization on Kleist: "Aus einer unsicheren Stimmung, die den Helden umgibt, erwächst in rascher Entwicklung das Problem. Diese Stimmung lebt in allen Nebenfiguren; hell wird sie in dem Helden. Und darin liegt es, dass bei Kleist die Gesamtpersönlichkeit, die Volksindividualität zum eigentlichen Helden wird. Der Heros der *Hermannsschlacht* ist das deutsche Volk; der rechte Sieger

¹ Cf. also I, ii (two references) and the whole of IV, ii.

im *Prinzen von Homburg* ist: Brandenburg."¹ As an inverse statement of Kleist's characteristics, this passage seems completely adequate. Granting the plots of the two plays mentioned, it is difficult to realize how the mass could be more subordinated than is the case here. Something has already been said of the *Hermannsschlacht*, a play "einzig und allein auf diesen Augenblick berechnet." As for the *Prinz von Homburg*, which is, likewise, closely identified with the spirit of the times, it is strange that in a play the immediate purpose of which had everything to gain from massed effects there should be no military parade, much less a folk-scene. As Erich Schmidt observes: "Kein Schwede tritt auf; es wird nie mit Massenszenen gearbeitet; das Bürgertum Brandenburgs erscheint nirgends, die Bauernschaft nur für einen Augenblick, um Herberge für einen hohen Gast zu bieten; unser Drama gehört allein dem Hof und den Offizieren des Kurfürsten."² If it had been possible for Kleist to organize a larger body of humanity and make it articulate, as Schiller and Hauptmann could, it would surely have been here, in the two historical plays, when his heart beat high for Prussia, for, in spite of their peculiarities, they remain the most comprehensive utterance in his country's literature of the spirit of regeneration which stirred Fichte and the war poets. The accident of circumstance furnishes us in these last plays with proof, otherwise not forthcoming, that Kleist was not only constitutionally disinclined, but constitutionally unable to control and energize the crowd. His overpowering feeling for personality leaves us after a repeated perusal of these latest creations with a profound impression of individual purposefulness, so utter as to be enigmatic, in Hermann, and of individual volatility, disturbing to some readers even today, in Prinz Friedrich von Homburg. Reserve must be made for that early fragment, *Robert Guiskard*, which opens splendidly on the larger note of a people's voice, but it must be remembered that the play was left unfinished, and the assumption is plausible that Kleist was defeated by a plan which was not sufficiently compatible to his imagination.

Kleist's ability, then, to conceive and organize dramatically is thus exactly in line with his personal conviction about life. Just as

¹ *Die deutsche Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts*, I, 28.

² Kleist, *Werke*, III, 12.

he remained more completely than most adults the center of a disorderly universe, so his natural tendency in play-writing was to throw full energy into a single character and to surround it with passive material, human and inanimate, which it illumines, quickens, or annihilates at will. And just as this sole constant, the personality, was to Kleist a riddle, incalculable and fraught with unsuspected potentialities, so in his plays these central figures, violent as they are, are not usually fully revealed as consistent entities but only flashed into the eye from the particular angle of immediate observation. This excessive realism only serves to emphasize the detachment of these works from common life, and even from one another. Each play is its own world. We cannot, as in Shakspeare, transfer a character in imagination from one play to another. In each there is a separate system of energies. How complete, for example, is the isolation, from the world and from other plays, of *Der zerbrochene Krug*. There is not the faintest vein of social satire or criticism in this delightful study of a country judge and his escapades. It is, rather, a special world, analogous to ours, but not of it, constructed for our personal delight. Judge Adam, more fortunate than his confrères of this earth, awakens no contempt and feels no humiliation, and even the last picture—

Seht! wie der Richter Adam, bitt' ich euch,
 Berg auf, Berg ab, als flöh' er Rad und Galgen,
 Das aufgepflügte Winterfeld durchstampft!

.
 Jetzt kommt er auf die Strasse. Seht! seht!
 Wie die Perücke ihm den Rücken peitscht!

[ll. 1954-56, 1958-59]—

elicits our unreserved gratitude for a final touch of generous entertainment.

It can be seen, then, that throughout Kleist's plays, his extraordinary bias toward the personal, as the controlling energy, determines or, at least, in large measure affects the impression they convey to the student. Mention has been made, here and there in this paper, of every drama of his, except the *Amphitryon*, where he was subordinating his creative power to purposes of translation. Considering the five plays, in which his powers are fully revealed, it is not hard to see

that the balance of energies among the individual, the collective, and the impersonal is essential in what is felt to be artistic breadth and sanity. The *Hermannsschlacht* and *Penthesilea*, both works of unforgettable vigor and originality, lack the equilibrium of greater dramas while sharing, beyond doubt, many of their virtues. The very defects of *Käthchen*, the popular concessions—perhaps some of those which Kleist so bitterly regretted—restore a semblance of balance, not exactly inherent, and may help it to weather storms of time, in which its immediate fellows, unsteadied by general cargo, may ultimately go down. The *Prinz von Homburg* and *Der zerbrochene Krug* stand apart from these three. They retain in restrained form the virtues of Kleist's genius and powerfully correct his great excess. Both contain a rich gallery of portraits; both touch the healthier national traditions. Judge Adam, first cousin to Falstaff, is not the life-energy of his play, but merely its central figure. Licht, the sly clerk, the garrulous Frau Marthe, Veit and Ruprecht, those admirable villagers, all stand on their own feet; they draw their life from the soil and move in the larger sunlight.

Ein rüstig Mädel ist's, ich hab's beim Ernten
 Gesehn, wo alles von der Faust ihr ging,
 Und ihr das Heu man flog, als wie gemaust.
 Da sagt' ich: "Willst du?" Und sie sagte: "Ach!
 Was du da gekelst." Und nachher sagt' sie: "Ja."
 [ll. 876-80.]

Here Kleist touches Mother Earth, as nowhere in the extremer plays. He joins the ranks in peasant literature with Otto Ludwig and Anzengruber, and, to the delight of his admirers, adds his share to the splendid native tradition that was later enriched by the *Heiteretei* and the *Kreuzelschreiber*. And in the *Prinz von Homburg*, the presence alone of old "Hans Kottwitz aus der Priegnitz" and the still greater Kurfürst, the "märk'sche Weise" of these splendid fellows, gives ample poise to this fascinating study. Hence, while the relation of these two plays to the main characteristics of Kleist's other works can easily be traced, it is unobtrusive, and the whole manner of them is on altogether broader lines.

By virtue of these two plays Kleist has a claim on all students of drama. There is little or nothing in character-comedy since Shakespeare that is choicer than *Der zerbrochene Krug*, and in serious drama

the *Prinz von Homburg*, with its superlative deftness, holds a unique and distinguished place.

For theorists in literature Kleist has done still more. The critic who is not content with masterpieces alone, where poets so ungenerously cover their traces, will find in a fuller study of Kleist a most welcome insistence on the real *point de départ* in literary judgments. In order to point the physician's finger at Kleist's poetic constitution, its basis of energy, not its basis of dexterity, must be regarded. He insists, all unconsciously, on the underlying arrangement of vitalities which sustains the whole of literature. The application of accepted Classical and Romantic standards to his work shows how external, not to say superficial, are such criteria. Drama is at bottom a system of energies, and it is to Kleist's enormous credit that he defies examination on any shallower basis.

BARKER FAIRLEY

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO